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Adoptability and acceptability of peace journalism among Afghan photojournalists: Lessons for peace journalism training in conflict-affected countries

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Abstract

In this article, I seek to inform Peace Journalism (PJ) education and training in conflict-affected countries in particular. Based on a case study of the professional experiences of Afghan photojournalists, I offer insights into the acceptability and adoptability of PJ practice by journalists from conflict-affected countries. I present six key findings of a larger study on Afghan photojournalists in this article and discuss the lessons they hold for PJ training in conflict-affected countries. In sections 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5, I provide some important theoretical, contextual and methodological background. In section 6, I discuss three professional adversities faced by Afghan photojournalists and evaluate the obstacles that implementation of PJ faces as a result of them. In section 7, I describe one professional motivator for Afghan photojournalists and discuss the opportunity it presents for PJ adoption. In

section 8, I describe two other constraints faced by Afghan photojournalists related specifically to donor-funded media development in post-2001 Afghanistan and discuss their implications for PJ training. Finally in section 9, while noting the limitations of the current study, I offer two ways forward for PJ training in conflict-affected countries like Afghanistan.

Journalism training in conflict-affected countries

Training in PJ is often offered as “continuing professional development as a form of donor aid” in conflict-affected countries (Lynch, 2015b, p.194). As such, PJ has a responsibility to engage with the emerging cognizance among scholars that donor-funded journalism training in conflict-affected countries often do not take into account the socio-cultural, political-economic and professional realities of the particular conflict-affected society where they are offered (Betz, 2015, pp. 219-232; Relly et al., 2015, pp. 471-497; Relly and Zanger, 2016, pp.1-23).

Though the question of the influence of sociological realities of a country on journalists is not new in academic discussion of PJ¹, scholars writing about the rationale for offering PJ training in conflict-affected countries however have maintained² that PJ is more readily acceptable to journalists in societies “that have experienced the ravages of violent conflict” (Hackett, 2006, p.11). Little to no concrete sociological evidence³ has been offered to support these observations and instead the consensus sometimes has been that this question is “effectively settled” (Lynch, 2015a, p. 25) by content analysis studies that show elements of PJ exist in manifest news content in different countries. More recently, the case for identifying “ideational distinctions, beyond the level of manifest content, in the representation of conflicts and match them to those in the PJ model” (Lynch, 2015b, p. 194) has been made by Nohrstedt & Ottosen (2015, pp. 225-6). The current article is inspired by this proposal but applies it in the context of training journalists in PJ in conflict-affected countries, rather than the representations they produce.

PJ and sociological particularities of journalistic profession

Sociological studies of journalism have long noted that journalism as a form of cultural production varies according to its socio-cultural context. Studies have been undertaken by both qualitative methods based on participant observation (e.g. Pedelty, 1995) and interviews with journalists (e.g. Rantanen, 2004, pp. 302-314) as well as more quantitatively oriented survey and questionnaire-based studies (e.g. Fahmy, 2005) utilizing theoretical frameworks such as the hierarchy of influence model (Shoemaker and Reese, 2014) to understand the sociological particularities of journalistic practice.

In the particular context of developing, transitional or conflict-affected countries, journalism has been shown to be affected by the particular history of where it is practiced (e.g. Coman, 2004; Shafer & Freedman, 2003; Skjerdal, 2012) as well as cultural specificities (e.g. Ibrahim, 2003), religious factors (e.g. Pin-tak, 2014) and national affiliations (e.g. Nossek, 2004). Comparative studies of journalistic self-perception

1 For example, see Tehranian (2002, p. 60); Blasi, 2009, Rodney-Gumede (2016)

2 See the continuity of this argument from Lynch and McGoldrick (2005, p. 223) and McGoldrick (2006, p. 4) to Lynch and Galtung (2010: p. 195) and Hackett (2011, p. 45).

3 Important exceptions are Onadipe and Lord's study (1999 quoted in McGoldrick, 2006) and Weighton (2015). For a discussion of the latter, see Mitra (2016a, p. 12).

have also found significant differences in how Western and non-Western journalists approach their own work ethically, epistemologically and institutionally in diverse socio-cultural contexts (e.g. Reich and Hantzsch, 2013).⁴

Studies of journalistic perception and practice where Western and non-Western news personnel work side by side (e.g. Bunce, 2010, 2015; Khan, 2011; Murrell, 2010, 2015; Palmer & Fontan, 2007; Palmer, 2016) have also shown that not only do such groups approach and assess their work differently but that there are significant tensions between them which stem from both differences in material employment conditions as well as socio-culturally constituted perceptions regarding the profession (e.g. Bunce, 2010, p. 527; Khan, 2011, pp. 92-3; Palmer, 2016, p.3). Most relevantly for the current discussion, tensions between local journalistic production and international 'liberal democratic' models of journalism introduced by media development initiatives in conflict-affected countries has been noted in studies on Iraqi journalists (Relly et al., 2015) and in Afghanistan (Relly & Zanger, 2016).

Considering this body of evidence that journalism is a practice which is multifarious, striated by differences, and affected by tensions generated by forces and factors within and without the profession, I have argued elsewhere that PJ needs to firstly inform itself of such differences and secondly to locate both the obstacles and opportunities that such differences in journalistic practice might present for PJ in different socio-cultural contexts (Mitra, 2016a: pp. 1-17).

In light of Relly et al.'s (2015) and Relly and Zanger's recent studies (2016) on tensions generated by donor-funded journalistic training in conflict-affected countries⁵, understanding the sociological particularities of such countries is especially important since PJ training has been and is offered as part of donor aid in such countries. Such training initiatives can benefit from a sociological understanding to see if PJ's existing norms and values fit with the local journalists and also how it can be made to fit better. As such, I offer here the case study of the practice of photojournalism in Afghanistan in relation to the socio-cultural and political-economic context of Afghanistan as a conflict-affected country.

Case study of photojournalism in Afghanistan: An example in extremis

As a case study, photojournalism in Afghanistan serves as an example in extremis of sociological particularities of journalistic practice – both in its socio-cultural factors as well as its political-economic situation as a conflict-affected society. Below are three salient points regarding post-2001 Afghanistan, which are important context for the current discussion.

Firstly, Afghanistan is a society where photography over the last century, (Dupree, 2002; Edwards, 2006; 2013), under the Taliban (Murray, 2012; Rawan, 2002) has been and is even now (Smith, 2011, p. 30) marginalized because of socio-cultural and religious reasons. Afghan society, with its continuing 'traditional cultural patterns' has long had a fraught relationship with images (Dupree, 2002, p. 978-979). Historically, the region has been described by historians as having "a lean visual culture" (Edwards, 2006, p. 113). The suspicion of photography in Afghanistan which has been traced by historians as far back as the 19th century (Edwards, 2006, pp. 113-114), has not disappeared entirely today. A study on Afghan media workers from 2011, found that visual news producers had a heightened threat perception because their profession conflicted with widely held "Afghan's religious beliefs and views" (Smith, 2011, p. 30).

Secondly, Afghanistan remains one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a journalist (CPJ Global Impunity Index, 2016). The latest report (available at the time of writing) by Afghan Journalist Safety Committee (AJSC, 2017, p. 2) on threats faced by Afghan journalists in 2016 notes "that violence has not only become heavier qualitatively, but the number of instances of violence against journalists has witnessed a 38 percent increase relative to 2015". The report also mentioned the sources of the total "73 cases of intimidation and violence" it recorded in the latter half of 2016. "Government officials have been responsible for 50 % of cases of violence against journalists in 2016 whereas Taliban have the responsibility for 20 % and unknown individuals have been responsible for 14 % of cases of violence against journalists", says the report (2017, p. 2). This constant threat of violence and intimidation is also part of the social situation under which Afghan photojournalists work.

Thirdly, Afghanistan's media sector since the US and NATO invasion in early 2000s has seen a proliferation of journalism training initiatives as part of the international community's reconstruction efforts in the country (Davin et al., 2010, pp. 29-30). One report published in 2012 noted that "hundreds of millions of dollars" have been spent just in media development and journalistic capacity building programmes by international and regional donor governments, NGOs and other actors (Cary, 2012, pp. 24-26). Media de-

⁴ The list of studies I mention here is only suggestive. For fuller reviews of relevant literature, see Reilly et al. (2015, pp. 474-476) and Mitra (2016a, pp. 3-5).

⁵ See Relly & Zanger (2016: pp.5-7) for a discussion of the problem.

velopment efforts in Afghanistan “has involved a complex web of vertical and horizontal relationships among media players, including donors, NGOs and international organizations. These actors, along with the numerous independent Afghan journalists ready to get on board, have proved critical in shaping the media environment” in Afghanistan today⁶ says Beikart (2015, p. 29). As such, the media system in post-2001 Afghanistan was described by Brown (2013) as a ‘patrons-based system’ dependent on foreign donors and aid agencies primarily, but also the Afghan government and other politically powerful Afghans such as warlords. Relly and Zanger (2016) have recently described this dependence as ‘capture’ of the Afghan news media by foreign donors and these other domestic agents. They concluded that the problems in Afghan news media can be attributed, *inter alia*, to “imported journalism values...layered upon previous and continued institutional arrangements and where violence and instability continue unabated” (Relly & Zanger, 2016, p. 1).

Theoretical framework

In seeking to understand the acceptability and adoptability of PJ training by Afghan photojournalists in terms of their socio-cultural, political-economic and professional context, I use a theoretical framework which merges different ‘bottom-up’ and ‘top-down’ constraints and obstacles experienced by these photojournalists but at the same time keeps in view their professional motivations. In brief, I study the ‘myths’, ‘frames’, ‘flaks’ and ‘rewards’ which influence photojournalistic work in Afghanistan as a holistic way “to test the applicability and acceptability of PJ’s norms and prescriptions for working journalists” (Mitra, 2016a, p. 5). This framework broadens the understanding of what PJ scholars have called the ‘feedback loop’ of journalists (Lynch, 2004, pp. 263–264; Lynch and McGoldrick, 2005, p. xix; Lynch and Galtung, 2010, p. 29). I have argued and discussed in detail elsewhere why this particular theoretical framework can be effective (Mitra, 2016a, pp. 1-17).

Using this theoretical framework, in this discussion below, I contextualize the experiences of the Afghan photojournalists at a ‘meso-level’ under the following categories⁷:

the commonly held beliefs and assumptions in society influencing Afghan photojournalists, i.e. ‘myths’ (Mitra, 2016a, p. 9),

the punitive and restrictive factors constraining them i.e. ‘flaks’ (Mitra, 2016a, pp. 7-8),

the control, exchange and manipulation of ‘informational frameworks’ which are prevalent among these photojournalists’ routine work i.e. ‘frames’ (Mitra, 2016a, pp. 8-9),

as well as the professional rewards and motivations for these photojournalists (Mitra, 2016a, p. 7)

Participant details and method

I conducted open-ended, semi-structured interviews with 20 current or previous Afghan photojournalists in Kabul, Afghanistan between September and October in 2014. Of the total number, 17 were men and three were women. Participants were mostly recruited with the help of the Kabul-based civil society organization, Afghan Journalist Safety Committee. Independent contact with a photography training centre in Kabul to recruit participants as well as snowball sampling were also used to reach respondents. As part of the ethical guidelines⁸ to be followed in the study, the respondents and the organizations they worked for will not be named. The photojournalists are referred to as ‘respondents’ followed by the numerals 1 to 20 in a randomly assigned but consistent order. All other information which can lead to their identity being known is removed. Following the interviews, the transcripts were thematically analyzed both inductively and deductively (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Guest et al., 2011) to produce the findings I present below.

⁶ See Relly & Zanger (2016, pp. 2-4) for a summary of media development in post-2001 Afghanistan. See Brown (2013, 177-189) for a more in-depth description of the same.

⁷ Each of these categories are in turn derived from theoretical frameworks which have been influential within the discipline of media and communication studies. For a full discussion on the development of this framework, see Mitra, 2016a, pp. 1-17

⁸ This study was approved under the Tri-council Policy Statement 2: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (December, 2010) of Canada from the Non-Medical Research Ethics Board of the University of Western Ontario under file no. 105378.

Adoptability of PJ among Afghan photojournalists

In this section, I contextualize three key findings of my study, each of which relate to the meso-level categories of myths, flaks and frames respectively, to identify the lessons it holds for adoptability of PJ in Afghanistan for Afghan photojournalists.

Most mentioned social 'Myth': Distrust of photography

Among other socio-cultural factors which belong to the level of societal 'myths' (e.g. gender constraints for women photojournalists to work in the profession), the socio-cultural factor most mentioned by the respondents was distrust of photographic images and photographers in Afghan society. 18 of the 20 respondents discussed this as an impediment in the work they do. The distrust of photography was most often mentioned in terms of societal rules against photographing women for public circulation. The societal taboo surrounding women having their photographs taken and published was described by Respondent 17,

"...here in Afghanistan, the women, they don't want to be in the picture. When they don't want to show their faces, how can they be in picture? Some women, they are wearing the burqa, still they are saying if our relative[s] see our picture, in the TV or in the newspaper, 'they [will ask] me why... you are in the newspaper?' So they don't have any answer for that. It's kind of...like shame for that woman. 'Do you know why your picture is there?' and she [would] have no answer for that."

This taboo against photographing women in Afghan society puts photojournalists' livelihoods and lives at risk. As Respondent 6 said,

"sometimes...when we take pictures of women, we face different clashes, even from police officers, asking why you are taking picture of wom[e]n, it's not allowed and this kind of thing...mostly we avoid taking pictures of women...because of the cultural problem. Because two or three times, I went to jail. I mean jail for many hours, because people attack[ed] me [for] taking pictures. Even the woman in burqa, you know their face was not in view but they attack[ed]...me and in one case, they wanted to break my camera...."

Being a woman was also not advantageous for the female respondents when it came to overcoming the difficulty of taking photographs of women. Female respondents 7 and 20 mentioned facing problems while photographing women while female respondent 4 said that even for a woman photographer,

"things are very sensitive when it comes to women and photographing women. And you have to use sometimes your judgement, when to stop, forget it, or when it's time to go".

The suspicion of photography, however, was noted by the respondents as not limited only to photographing Afghan women. Several respondents also mentioned a more general distrust of photography which included photographing men. Respondent 18 recounted an experience when in

"Helmand, there was [an] elder[s'] gathering, they were gathered with the ISAF [International Security Assistance Force], with the Brits, [to] discuss about some problem [in] the villages. When I tr[ie]d to take [a] picture, (gestures of gun cocking), 'no, don't!' ...[I said] 'but you are man, not woman'. 'No'. None of them [agreed]."

This finding points to how, as PJ traverses cultural boundaries, it faces particular socio-cultural constraints which its current definition of emphasizing 'people oriented coverage' (especially the particular emphasis on showing 'women'⁹ within it, in this case), cannot adequately answer.

Most-mentioned 'Flak': threat, intimidation and violence

Among other 'flak' faced by Afghan photojournalists (such as censorship through legal and extra-legal means), 17 of the respondents mentioned that they faced threats and intimidation, as well as violence, from Afghan military and intelligence personnel, in addition to the police and powerful officials from the Afghan government, not to mention the Taliban insurgents. The Taliban insurgents' role in affecting photographers in Afghanistan was not limited only to the physical threat they posed with the regular attacks and bomb blasts they perpetrated. The threat they posed was more direct in areas of the country where their influence was stronger than the Afghan national government's. Respondent 16 had had to abandon the house he had built in a province in the south of the country and move to Kabul because he was

"being warned by my relatives, they live in -----[Southern Afghan province], and they are all Talibs,

9 Cf. "especially women" under "people-oriented coverage" in War Journalism/Peace Journalism Table; Lynch & Galtung, 2010, p. 13. This understanding in turn can be traced back to Hoijer, Nohrstedt & Ottosen's (2002) discussion of women (along with children and aged) as "better victims than others" in the "discourse of global compassion" (p. 13) which subsequently has been mentioned and studied specifically for the analysis of news images by Ottosen (2007, pp. 1-18; see especially pp. 9-14). The 'essentialism' implied in depicting women as symbols of 'peace' has been recently, and nuancedly, explored by Orgeret (2016, pp. 207-223) who shows how naïve depictions of women as "peaceful and caretakers, often smiling" in newspaper coverage cannot be simplistically "seen as positive in the light of peace journalism" (2016, p. 220).

they are extremists. Since I have shaved my beard, I am wearing jeans, I wear [western] shirt[s], they consider me a kafer (infidel), non-Muslim ... I am being warned because I am doing such work. And they don't want me to work with, you know, do photography...."

But it was not only the Taliban insurgents which was the source of threat for Afghan photographers. Respondent 16 went on to mention the threat posed by Afghan military forces while Respondent 9 mentioned:

"I have been beaten, I have been injured. Police fired at me during my job".

Afghan government officials were also likely to be the source of such threats. Respondent 10 described his experience of having to move to Kabul which had parallels to the experience of respondent 16. However, the source of threat was not the Taliban, but:

"the Chief of Police, Provincial Governor, Prosecutor... I made a [news] report and the Chief of Police was dismissed next day. How can I live there any more? There's no protection for journalists... I don't feel very secure in my town so I decided to come to Kabul, because in Kabul, they are not [as] much strong as [in] [province to the west of Kabul]...."

Heightened threat of violence and lack of security is true for photographers working in conflict-ridden areas across the world given the nature of their job (Allan, 2011; Allan and Sreedharan, 2016). What made the situation described by Afghan photographers different from other conflict photographers, however, is the diversity of the sources of threat and the varied manifestations that such threats take, making the work of a photographer in Afghanistan not only sometimes dangerous, but dangerous all the time, everywhere. Respondent 6 said that while for conflict photographers elsewhere,

"[t]here is a war and you know that's the frontline and I cannot go there, [but for Afghan photojournalists] here the frontlines disappear, it happens every minute".

While PJ's norms pay attention to 'flaks' such as censorship, the more direct and more deadly forms of 'flak', intimidation, physical threats and harassment common in a conflict-affected country needs to be acknowledged as part of the extraneous factors which affect journalists' day to day work.

Most mentioned frames: elite actors and leaders, negative news, violence and military personnel

The photographers mentioned routinely taking photos of political leaders and actors, and military personnel, as well as war and violence. Four respondents mentioned that the news images of Afghanistan they took tended to be of political leaders and actors. For example, Respondent 2, who also worked as a photo-editor, mentioned that government officials, events at the presidential palace in Kabul and images of government of Afghanistan ministry offices as often being subjects of the images he produces.

Three respondents described routinely taking 'negative' images of Afghanistan, for example, Respondent 14 who said that,

"as far as the news agencies are concerned, they want news pictures and war and such things. So we can't just send them positive pictures, we should send them negative pictures."

The most mentioned visual frame, discussed by 17 respondents, were news photographs depicting events of violence, the most common form of which, at the time of the study, were suicide attacks carried out regularly by the Taliban. Respondent 13 noted that,

"mostly [I] like to show violent stories of Afghanistan to international people... [they] want to know about breaking news... like I mean suicide attack."

Covering "demonstrations or a suicide explosion" was so routine for Respondent 9 that he considered himself specialized in images from such events.

Closely related to the prevalence of violence in images taken by the Afghan photojournalists, was the focus on military personnel in images, mentioned by four respondents, for example, Respondent 11 who described the images he took for his international news agency after a suicide attack happens:

"When I arrive and I [see] that ok, the bodies are already out so don't go really close to do it, you know, because there is no necess[ity]. So I take the whole scene, wide shot of the whole scene. And the detail, what's the police doing, what's the army doing, the US army is doing?"

Taken together, the responses show a high degree of adherence to war journalism frames in the photos routinely taken by Afghan photojournalists such as focus on 'elites', negative news, violence and military personnel (cf. Lynch & Galtung, 2010, pp. 12-14).

However, 12 of the respondents also noted that these kind of images were produced by them largely because of international demand for these subjects which dictated their work. The international demand which dictated their choice of images influenced them through the international client news organizations

they supplied images to (five respondents), the editors they worked for (10 respondents), personnel of the regional image processing desks of news agencies they sent images to (three respondents), as well as international colleagues they worked with (five respondents). Photojournalistic work is affected by visual gatekeeping norms and routines¹⁰ which in turn are affected by extraneous influences including, but not limited to, perceived demand from audiences. How imbalances are created in news coverage through and within the gatekeeping process though noted (e.g. Lynch, 2015b, p. 194) has so far not adequately been addressed within PJ (Mitra, 2016b) nor has the question of how local journalists whose work is dictated by foreign news organizations (and thus, foreign editors and audiences) can intervene in biased news coverage. This is especially pertinent in the case of local journalists in conflict-affected countries because such local journalists are increasingly being hired by global news organizations as a form of cost-cutting¹¹.

Acceptability of PJ among Afghan photojournalists

The most widely discussed motivation among the Afghan photojournalists were financial in nature, in other words, finding and keeping a regular source of income in a country where income sources are few and far between. However, there was one other motivator mentioned by the respondents which showed the possibility of acceptability of PJ among this group of professionals.

Motivator: The wish to depict positive, peaceful Afghanistan

Though they mentioned routinely taking photographs which adhered to War Journalism frames, 17 of the photojournalists mentioned that they would prefer to portray the more 'peaceful' or 'positive' side of Afghan society. Some of them expressed this wish as a reaction to the international demands for negative and violent images of Afghanistan. For example, Respondent 20 said:

"For the past few years, all foreigners have seen is war in Afghanistan, suicide attacks, violence. They have a bad image in their mind of Afghanistan. But [I] think that besides that we should promote those pictures which show the beauty of Afghanistan, the development of Afghanistan...[I] think that [I would] prefer to show the beauty of Afghanistan than war or violence, because [I] think that it is enough [of] showing such things."

For some others, this wish was also part of what they perceived was their professional role as photojournalists. For example, Respondent 14 said that the motivation to show positive sides of Afghanistan means that:

"we don't want to change reality, reality is still there, but besides the negativity, besides the negative things in our society, we have positive things as well so we want to show them as well."

Besides expressing their intention, 13 respondents said that they actively tried to influence or have successfully influenced image-choices. Among these, Respondents 3 and 19 mentioned one such concrete example each of personal intervention in image choices while Respondents 11 and 13 noted three examples each of such instances. Respondent 16 noted two such examples, saying that:

I went myself, [this was my own] idea, this is not my agency['s] idea... my agencies have never asked me to take such pictures or work on such stories or feature stories, but it is my own creativity that I have worked on such positive features, that I have taken some pictures".

These findings show that in spite of the high degree of international influences through organizational demands and journalistic routines on the Afghan photojournalists, their motivations as Afghans do play a part in their professional life. Moreover, such factors do not only exist as a separate force to their professional norms, perceptions and routines but are actively negotiated by the Afghan photojournalists as both reactions against as well as extension of journalistic professional norms. Furthermore, these responses by the Afghan photojournalists show concurrence with PJ norms and point to the opportunities for acceptance of PJ among Afghan photojournalists.

However, given the constraints to adopting PJ norms that I note in the previous section, I posit that, in order to be effective, PJ training provided in conflict-affected countries cannot stay oblivious to the lived realities of the media professionals it aims to address. While the motivation among the Afghan photojournalists to show peaceful, positive sides of Afghan society supports the observation that journalists from 'war victim

¹⁰ See Shoemaker & Vos (2009, pp. 47-8) for a discussion on visual gatekeeping. See Bissell (2000); Fahmy (2005) for examples of studies of visual gatekeeping.

¹¹ Bunce (2015, pp. 46-7) says "one of the most striking trends in foreign news production over the last 20 years is the increased centrality and importance of local 'foreign correspondents': journalists who report on their home country for global news outlets". See also, Hamilton and Jenner (2004) and Paterson (2011).

societies' might indeed be amenable to PJ (Hackett, 2011, p. 45) the responses regarding their routine work, the lack of security they face as well as the socio-cultural distrust directed towards them show that PJ cannot be automatically thought as "most likely to take root" (Hackett, 2006, p. 11) in conflict-affected societies. The need to identify, learn from, and adapt PJ to the myths, frames, flaks as well as motivations which make up the feedback loop of journalists in a conflict-affected country is paramount. But the feedback loop in a conflict-affected country is also potentially affected by donor-funded journalism training. This factor needs also be considered critically by PJ.

Afghan photojournalists' views on journalistic training and capacity development in post-2001 Afghanistan: implications for PJ

As I have mentioned above, the media sector in Afghanistan is heavily dependent on foreign sources of funds, be it from foreign government-run aid agencies, international community organizations or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) engaged in development work in the country (Brown, 2013; Relly & Zanger, 2016). Given the utter decimation of photography as a practice and profession between 1996-2001 (Rawan, 2002), photojournalistic training has been an important part of journalistic capacity building projects, most notably but not only, by the training center and international NGO called 'Aina' (Cary, 2012; Murray, 2012).

Photojournalistic training in Afghanistan was noted by the respondents of this study as especially dependent on such foreign 'patrons'. Donor-aided photojournalism training has played both a positive and negative role in Afghanistan, according to the respondents. The positive role of internationally-funded initiatives in re-establishing photography and photojournalism as a profession was noted by 18 respondents. Briefly, they noted that international donor funds had not only made training in photojournalism and photography possible, but also that such funds and international attention on Afghanistan have created photojournalistic jobs for Afghans. They also noted the support for photographic projects and exhibitions that Afghan photographers received from international donors and other foreign sources.

But 16 of the respondents also felt that the quality, extent, level as well as access to photography training available in Afghanistan was inadequate at the time of the study. Respondent 10 thought that as a whole the international community has failed to provide opportunities for comprehensive training for Afghan journalists while Respondent 12 said that, in his experience, donor funding for photography training was not transparently or equitably distributed. Respondent 1 pointed out the problems caused for aspiring photographers by sporadic funding and short-term goals of training programmes dictated by the structure of donor-funded projects,

"Here in Afghanistan, unfortunately, they are not working as a process, [t]hey are working just as a project. They are coming and they are looking just for their own ends. And if they are giving training, they are giving...training only in what they want. They are not [paying attention to] the realities.... They just give [the trainees] a camera and [say], "take photo from there and there" and just give them [an] idea but [do] not [teach them]... important and professional things. They are not working [closely] with these trainees. Because they are coming like a project."

Seen in this light, PJ training in developing countries provided with the help of Western donors should not only engage in the 'critical pedagogy' that Lynch (2008, p. 301; 2015, p. 29) had called for in this context, but such critical approach should also be self-reflective about its own position within donor-funded media development initiatives especially because as Relly & Zanger (2016, p. 18) noted in the case of Afghanistan, "[d]onor and foreign government" control on the news media in the country "also have certain hallmarks, specifically the necessity of following certain ideologies...."

Furthermore, respondents in this study felt that short-term photojournalistic training needed to be supplemented or replaced with long term, merit-based formal education for photojournalists¹². For example, Respondent 2 said that to have:

"complete photographer[s] or photojournalists in Afghanistan", [it should be like i]n other countries, [where] there's a specific faculty or university for photography and photojournalism. But here we only have ten days' training, fifteen days' training.... It's useful. But not so complete. I attend[ed] many workshops. Sometimes, the workshop [taught me] something I need, sometimes the workshop [taught] me something I don't need.... For five workshop[s], two workshops... [were] useful for me. So it's the same issue... it is not academic, step by step, semester by semester."

¹² The existing facilities at Kabul University were widely noted by the photojournalists as inadequate and ineffective.

This observation by six of the respondents supports the argument made by Nohrstedt and Ottosen (2015, p. 221) that PJ education and training across the world should have “a joint approach together with universities, colleges, training institutes, NGOs” as well as international community organizations. Wider collaboration has so far not been the case in Afghanistan where PJ training is offered not as part of formal university education for journalists but through local chapters of international NGOs such as Institute for War and Peace Reporting13 (IWPR) and Mediothek Afghanistan (Lynch, 2015c, pp. 10-11).

Two lessons for PJ training in conflict-affected countries

As a qualitative research project and a case study, the discussion I present above is not generalizable and cannot offer concrete solutions for PJ training in all conflict-affected countries. Indeed, I argue against such generalizations and instead would like to emphasize the need to be flexible and adaptive to particular political-economic and socio-cultural situations in such countries by understanding the particular myths, flaks, frames and rewards that are part of journalistic work there.

However, the findings and discussion I present is strengthened by the parallels they have with the discussion of other countries and contexts included in this special issue. Hoxha and Andresen demonstrate with the case of Kosovo that training journalists in conflict-affected contexts bring special challenges. In addition, Garrido, Jamil, as well as Pate et al., all point to the need for journalism training and education to be informed by the local context in which journalists function. More specifically, Jamil and Pate et al. both discuss the lack of PJ education within university curricula in Pakistan and West Africa respectively. In the light of the discussion above but also supported by these observations in the other contributions in this special issue, I offer two ways forward for future PJ training and education in conflict-affected countries.

First of all, PJ training has to devise strategies to address the socio-cultural, political, economic as well as practice-related constraints faced by journalists in conflict-affected societies and bring its universal normative goals and frameworks into critical contact with these on-the-ground realities. Such socio-political particularities – as my case study and that of the other authors in this special issue suggest – will vary geoculturally and so PJ training has to be just as flexible. And finally, based on the need voiced by the Afghan photojournalists I interviewed as well as the shortcomings in training identified by Jamil and Pate et al. in their respective studies, PJ may serve better and be better served by becoming part of the curricula of publicly funded, merit-based, university and college programmes rather than offering training in PJ through short-term, donor-funded project30s in conflict-affected countries. This shift will provide both the space for critical pedagogy that Lynch had called for, while making sure that PJ will not be complicit in any potential foreign donors’ ‘capture’ of news media (Relly & Zanger, 2016) in such countries.

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